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# The Implications of Democratization of Information

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## *Abstract*

Globalization is largely hailed as a positive force throughout the world—it is responsible for new technologies, revolutionary medical breakthroughs, and, of course, vacationing and tourism. However, globalization is also linked to our current information deluge, which greatly complicates citizens' lives as well as the role of government. In this paper, I attempt to answer several questions: Does this informational deluge make governance better or worse? Does it improve how we are governed? Does this improved governance ultimately lead to an improved society as well, or does it simply complicate things and hinder progress?

The democratization of information allows individuals unprecedented access to data and information, as well as the ability to generate information themselves. Figures like Julian Assange and his organization WikiLeaks aim to eradicate government secrets in the hope of creating a better society, but their attempts to do so actually destabilize and complicate governmental institutions. Even when individuals have access to this information, many choose to engage in “soma-like” activities instead of understanding the barrage of news and statistics they encounter.

Many now theorize we live in a postmodern world, largely due in part to the democratization of information. Detraditionalisation and “manufactured risks” are products of postmodernity; they pose a specifically troubling threat to the stability of government—if life is rapidly changing and all information is imperfect at some level, what can individuals rely upon? Finally, the rise of dataveillance and issues of privacy lead to difficult ethical dilemmas governmental institutions must address. The democratization of information complicates the role of governance in our daily lives; ultimately, more information does not necessarily equate to better governance or a higher quality of life.

## Introduction

Our world is smaller than ever before—while it once took sailors nearly seven weeks to travel across the Atlantic Ocean, now individuals can fly from New York to Shanghai in under 16 hours (“Worldly Ways”). As we speedily transport our physical bodies from one continent to another, our ideas and messages can be transported even faster via the World Wide Web. Beginning in the 1990s, individuals were able to freely exchange ideas, knowledge, and opinions via the Web. As more and more people gained access to previously unattainable information and technology, our world irrevocably changed. Although the democratization of information is commonly lauded as a beneficial force in society, it greatly complicates the role of government, oftentimes leading to ethical dilemmas.

In his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, author Thomas Friedman explores the rapid expansion of globalization, a trend largely made possible through recent “fundamental changes in how we communicate, how we invest, and how we learn about the world.” He officially references these changes as the democratization of technology, finance, information, and decision-making. These changes have occurred gradually over time. They were originally “born and incubated” in the Cold War Era—an era defined by the existence of walls and separation. The most iconic symbol of this time period is the Berlin Wall. The Berlin Wall physically separated the Soviet-controlled East Berlin and the Allied-controlled West Berlin from one another, but it also embodied the economic and social barriers erected between the Soviet Union and the USA at large. To Friedman, 1991 marks the transition from this Cold War System—dating back to 1946—to the New Globalization System (65).

Friedman believes this new system, which still thrives today, is a system of integration and connectedness. Free market capitalism and globalization dominates this current era with increased deregulation, more openness between nations, and an overall increase in the pace of daily life on a global scale. Friedman argues that within this new system there are two worlds: the Fast World and the Slow World. The Fast World is a world of the “wide-open plain,” while the Slow World is a world of people who either “choose to live away from the plain in some artificially walled-off valley of their own,” or those who the Fast World let “fall to the wayside” out of neglect (66). A New York stockbroker lives in the Fast World, while a small-time family farmer residing in a remote part of Iowa lives in the Slow World. However, both the stockbroker and farmer are affected by globalization.

Friedman imagines then-President Hafez al-Assad would admit Syria lives in the Slow World, citing a lack of McDonald's and the significance of "tribal bonds" over "corporate bonds" as proof of residency (271). This Slow World that Assad inhabits suffers from what Friedman calls "Microchip Immune Deficiency Syndrome" (MIDS). Friedman highlights cases of MIDS throughout post-Cold War era Europe, although he notes it can strike anywhere at any time. These countries have failed to adapt to the changes accompanied by the microchip and other technological advances (85). Countries suffering from MIDS are "too slow to respond to the challenges of the Fast World" and this "disease" can prove fatal.

### **Security and Privacy in the Fast World**

The democratization of information encourages the free flow of information, but there is still sensitive data that both individuals and government officials wish to protect; therefore, issues such as security and privacy are a key concern to people living in the Fast World, as well as to those who govern them. The majority of people in developed nations live and operate in the Fast World. The exchange of information in the Fast World occurs at an unsurprisingly speedy pace, which is made possible by technological developments. Friedman explains, "Thanks to satellite dishes, the Internet and television, we can now see through, hear through, and look through almost every conceivable wall" (82). If we can look through every kind of wall, whether it be physical, political, social, or economical, there can be no secrets—as long as there are people willing to do the work it takes to uncover them.

One such investigator is Julian Assange, an infamous, tech-savvy figure who burst onto the international scene with his project WikiLeaks, a website that makes "restricted or censored material of political, ethical, diplomatic or historical significance" available to the public at large ("Submit Documents to WikiLeaks"). Assange is undoubtedly at the forefront of the ongoing information and privacy debate, along with other computer programmers like Edward Snowden. Both programmers operate according to the simplistic notion that more information means no secrets, which in turn creates a better society. Similarly, transparency is generally celebrated as both a positive and necessary feature of any democratic government. In an interview with *The Telegraph*, the Dalai Lama criticized the secretive Chinese government, stating that "A lack of transparency results in distrust and a deep sense of insecurity" ("Dalai Lama"). Many politicians echo this sentiment, but Assange and Snowden take transparency to a new and possibly dangerous level.



Both programmers have dedicated their lives to seeing through the “walls” which governments, corporations, and people create around themselves. However, the information problem is far more complex than their short equation hints, and the fact that Assange and Snowden alike are such controversial figures only highlights the problem’s complexity. While the democratization of information has allowed democracy to flourish, it also could very well lead to the demise of these governmental institutions. Governmental transparency can be used to create trust and security among citizens, but it can just as easily be used to generate unforeseen levels of distrust and insecurity.

On July 22, 2016, merely months before the U.S. presidential election, WikiLeaks released over 44,053 internal emails from the U.S. Democratic National Committee, which the group described as “part one of our new Hillary Leaks series” (“Submit Documents to WikiLeaks”). Many U.S. intelligence experts suspect the goal of these hacks was not to create a secure, trusting environment through governmental transparency, but rather to “sow public distrust in the upcoming presidential election and in U.S. political institutions” (Priest et al.). These kind of leaks encourage institutions to uphold the mentality author Charlene Li refers to as “the more secretive, the safer” (Li 24). Institutions possessed classified information long before WikiLeaks, and they will continue to keep secrets regardless of figures like Assange or Snowden.

### **Comparing Information Systems Across the World**

Despite these recent scandals, the U.S.A. prides itself on being a free nation where each person is entitled to certain unalienable rights. It is through this freedom that the U.S.A. differentiates itself from other states throughout the world to create a unique lifestyle for its citizens—one that is supposedly vastly superior to the lifestyles of people living in dictatorships or non-democracies like China or Russia. But now more than ever, this belief in a uniqueness rooted in a democratic form of government seems more false than true. Author Evgeny Morozov points out that daily life in China and Russia, in certain cases, is not really all that different. He jokes, “They, too, wake up to the same annoying Lady Gaga song blasting from their iPhone” (86). In many cases, we all listen to the same music, view the same films, and purchase the same products—regardless of our nationality. Wham! made headlines as the first Western act to perform in China over three decades ago, but now major acts like Bon Jovi, Taylor Swift, Bob Dylan, and Ellie Goulding make regular tour stops in China and abroad (Savage).

Jeffrey Wasserstrom explores a similar sentiment in his book *China's Brave New World and Other Tales for Global Times*. Following the demise of the Soviet Union, he notes that the Chinese government realized that "to stay in power, it needed to do a much better job at supplying those it governs with appealing material goods and forms of entertainment" (129). More and more, citizens in non-democratic countries are enjoying the "perks" of democracy, meaning a varied choice in consumption and access to fun, mind-numbing activities. In China, for example, the regime now allows many books once considered "obscene or subversive" to be sold. Wasserstrom expands, "One can buy books about sex and treatises by Western liberal thinkers that would formerly have been banned" (132).

What was most shocking about Wasserstrom's trip to China was his experience in a Beijing Internet café, where he conducted a quick experiment. He visited the café in order to see if he could "find any traces in cyberspace of remembrance" for the student protesters who marched against the Chinese warlords on May 4, 1919. Not surprisingly, he found "many of the obvious places to look for such evidence were blocked." However, with a bit of creativity, Wasserstrom realized he could find controversial news articles with relative ease. While the *New York Times* was blocked, stories from the publication could still be found by visiting one of the many regional American newspapers that have their own web presence.

Curious if anyone else was doing the same, Wasserstrom glanced at the surrounding screens as he exited. He found, "Most of [the café's] young patrons were indulging in one of the soma-equivalents of their generation: playing, in an enraptured state of bliss, an online video game" (130). Even though such revolutionary information is readily available, it does not necessarily mean that people will, or even have a desire, to access it. This information may sit on the web for years, untouched and unnoticed, and thus may do little to better governance. Dave Pell, author of the *NextDraft* newsletter, argues that most people do not read past an article's headline. He argues, "That's the reality... The world is fast" (Pell). A 2014 survey conducted by the Media Insight Project supports Pell's claim, finding roughly six in ten Americans admit they had not read anything other than headlines within the last week (Cillizza). In China, citizens have to dig for the truth; in the U.S., acclaimed news sources do the research for us, yet many Americans are either too busy or simply do not care to digest the information.

## **Governance in the Postmodern Age**

Even in societies where truthful information is readily available and widely read, this scenario does not inherently create a good environment for positive governance. Globalization, caused in part by the democratization of information, has caused science to become the “basis of the modern conception of the world.” In his speech “The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World,” Czech statesman Vaclav Havel explains the danger of living in a world where “everything is possible and almost nothing is certain” (2). As globalization drives us towards a new world order, people struggle to find common ground and strong connections to one another. Havel believes we need something more fundamental than a universal respect for human rights to bind us together. Instead, he argues the basis of the new world order must be a “respect of the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence.”

While the democratization of information may connect us at a surface level, these connections are not strong enough to withstand the test of time. Havel argues, “Only someone who submits to the authority of the universal order and of creation, who values the right to be a part of it and a participant in it, can genuinely value himself and his neighbors, and thus honor their rights as well.” All the information in the world cannot fulfill our need for a certainty that we are “rooted in the earth and, at the same time, in the cosmos” (4). Governance in the postmodern world faces many challenges, one of which is dealing with increasing uncertainty and disconnect between different groups of people.

This problem is further complicated by politicians. Not all government officials are like Havel in this respect, and many thrive on division. A recent example is President Donald Trump, a figure who many critics say has done little to unite a nation after one of its ugliest elections. On New Year’s Eve of 2016, Trump tweeted, “Happy New Year to all, including to my many enemies and those who have fought me and lost so badly they just don’t know what to do. Love!” Americans lashed out at Trump, tweeting their dissent and frustration at his sarcastically divisive message.

While some politicians may wish to divide the American people, we are all bound together under one social contract: the Constitution of the United States of America. But how does living in an age of postmodernity impact this aging document? This is a complex question, and to answer in full would require many pages of thorough examination. With that in mind, scholar Calvin Massey argues, “There is no reason to think that the American

judiciary, or the Justices of the United States Supreme Court in particular, are exempt from the effects of the postmodernist thought that has seeped into our cultural understandings” (166).

This undeniable connection between postmodernity and Constitutional interpretation can be best examined in the case *Lawrence v. Texas*, which overruled *Bowers v. Hardwick* and thus declared Texas’s ban on homosexual behavior unconstitutional. A common postmodern claim is that there “can be no such thing as objective truth or objective reality” (Massey 171). The Court voided the Texas statute because it “furthers no legitimate state interest which can justify its intrusion into the personal and private life of the individual” (Massey 184). In this case, the Court “rejected promotion of morality as a legitimate state interest,” calling to question all laws with a “moral foundation” (Massey 185). This ruling continues to plague us today; the late Justice Scalia feared it would endanger state laws “against bigamy, same-sex marriage, adult incest, prostitution, masturbation, adultery, fornication, bestiality, and obscenity,” most of which rest on strong moral arguments rather than objective reasoning or other evidence (Massey 187).

The postmodern world is one of chaos and instability. Given this reality, Massey reasons, “There is no point in trying to impose an artificial coherence upon [the world]” (226). Already, scholars have begun to see the Court’s commitment to doctrinal coherence weaken, which is underscored by our society’s growing embrace of indeterminacy (Massey 230). Postmodernity changes the way our government functions, posing a special threat to our way of life and governance.

### **Global Challenges: Addressing Rapid Change and Risk**

Like Havel, Anthony Giddens similarly expresses a worry over this postmodern mentality, which he argues is a byproduct of globalization. This postmodern mentality complicates the role of government as officials attempt to keep order within a society that is quickly beginning to recognize the commonness of disorder over order, as well as the increasing risks linked to technology. Societies who once held concrete cultures now find themselves constantly re-evaluating with each new influx of information about how others live. Globalization can effectively end tradition in this sense, as local cultures are exposed to new cultures and ideas, often meaning that traditional ways of acting are called into question. This process is known as detraditionalisation, in which day-to-day life becomes less and less informed by “tradition for the sake of tradition” and rather based on what the individual desires (Giddens 100).

Tradition is necessary to an extent because it offers stability as well as the ability to configure a self-identity against a stable background. Through the process of detraditionalisation, we enter a problematic era where “nothing is sacred” (Giddens 50). Meanwhile, governments must eternally struggle to maintain order in a world where there is none. Tradition and culture are closely intertwined, and the degradation of tradition inevitably accompanies the degradation of culture. Without a strong cultural code, a governing body may flounder, being forced to change rapidly as its citizenry changes their own values rapidly.

While institutions struggle to combat the repercussions of detraditionalisation, “manufactured risks” play an equally challenging role. “Manufactured risks” are man-made risks, often caused by new technologies (Giddens 44). Since these risks are new, humans are ill-equipped to deal with them. While we know these new technologies could have potentially life-threatening effects on humanity, we know neither the precise effects nor their scope. In our postmodern world, we cannot be certain of anything—all information must be imperfect at some level. This belief is strengthened by the great wealth of varying expert opinions. Giddens highlights how “scientists so frequently disagree with one another, particularly in situations of manufactured risks,” leaving us unable to easily accept the findings they produce (Giddens 49).

The climate change debate is an excellent example of a manufactured risk that stirs great confusion and disagreement. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s research shows that July 2015-August 2016 (a 15-month period) set global records for heat (Borenstein). However, during his opening remarks at a climate science hearing in December 2015, Senator Ted Cruz stated, “According to the satellite data, there has been no significant global warming for the past 18 years” (“Sen. Cruz Confronts”). Because of the democratization of information, we now have more data than ever before—data that can be twisted and manipulated to fit specific agendas.

The climate change debate is further complicated by the uncertainty of its risk. In his examination of the popular fact that 97% of scientists agree with climate change, author Alex Epstein questions, “What is that supposed to mean? That climate changes? That we have some impact? That we have a large impact? That we have a catastrophically large impact?” Epstein concludes, “What the 97% of climate scientists allegedly agree on is very mild and in no way justifies restricting the energy that billions need” (Epstein). In the face of such uncertainty, it is unsurprising that many opt for political apathy and

inaction. While the democratization of information can make enlightening knowledge accessible to all, it can also cause debilitating uncertainty as individuals are overwhelmed by conflicting information.

### **Dataveillance and the Misuse of Information**

Most people value their privacy—both on and offline. Protecting individuals' data from corporations who wish to profit from it is another challenge governments face in the New Globalization System. People tend to largely focus on the positives associated with the democratization of technology and information, but it is perhaps more important to consider the negatives. Information can be used for evil just as it can be used for good. Take Facebook for example—a social networking site that is used to connect millions of people around the globe and is a platform often used to share news-related items and groundbreaking stories. This sharing of information, which allows new ideas to be voiced, can be viewed as a positive.

At the same time, giving a private company so much access to a vast amount of information can be a dangerous thing to do. Most worrisome is Google's use of facial recognition software. In his book *The Net Delusion*, Evgeny Morozov explores such downsides of new technology and the deluge of information. In the chapter "Why The KGB Wants You to Join Facebook" he explains how the face-recognition industry is booming:

In 2009 Face.com launched a Facebook application that first asks users to identify a Facebook friend of theirs in a photo and then proceeds to search the social networking site for other pictures in which that friend appears. By early 2010, the company boasted of scanning 9 billion pictures and identifying 52 million individuals. This is the kind of productivity that would make the KGB envious.  
(153)

Users reveal a wealth of information to Facebook—religious views, political preferences, their favorite movies, and of course, personal photos. People view Facebook as a fun social platform, but if used improperly, Facebook could be more effective than the Stasi of the GDR at surveillance. In the coming years, surveillance may even become an obsolete term, given the rise of dataveillance, which is the "systematic monitoring of people or groups, by means of personal data systems, in order to regulate or govern their behaviour" (Andrejevic et al. 5). This is made possible through the popularity of interactive devices, which also double as sensors capable of collecting



large sums of data (Andrejevic et al. 2). The subject of dataveillance brings up serious ethical questions for governmental institutions to address.

The information that Facebook collects from its community can then in turn be used to target or influence users. In 2013, Facebook conducted a psychological experiment on 689,003 unknowing users. The experiment tested “whether emotional contagion occurs between individuals on Facebook,” or in other words, how viewing more “positive” or “negative” posts affects users. The authors of the study manipulated users’ timelines to either make more “positive” or “negative” posts occur. The results of the study are not as important as the fact that the study even occurred at all. By agreeing to Facebook’s Data Use Policy, users signed over all of their data and information to Facebook (McNeal).

A more pressing issue is Facebook’s wealth of knowledge about individuals’ political beliefs, information which could easily be used to manipulate or influence election outcomes. During the 2016 Republican primaries, Senator Cruz’s team used Facebook’s advanced advertising tools to craft, target, and measure specific media campaigns geared to “win over” Trump supporters. Facebook features this story, along with several other political advertising campaigns, on its official marketing page, highlighting how Facebook actively showcases itself as a “platform to influence voting decisions just as it does with buying decisions” (Fiegerman).

In short, Facebook does not care if companies are selling users toothbrushes or political ideologies—as long as companies are willing to pay. For a price, Facebook grants companies access to powerful data, which allows them to better target users. Of course, this seems relatively harmless when the product being sold is a toothbrush, but when the product is a political candidate, the stakes become much higher. An anonymous former Facebook employee admitted, “This is a very powerful product that can have effects that we didn’t imagine it having” (Fiegerman). These manufactured risks complicate the role of government in our daily lives.

## Conclusion

Considering the many soma-like distractions with which we are bombarded by, including the WikiLeaks scandals, the woes of postmodernity, and dataveillance, the Internet clearly raises just as many problems—if not more—than it solves. By complicating local life through detraditionalisation and perpetuating a state of postmodernity, the Internet makes it harder for governments to rule large groups of people effectively. And while the Internet

is home to a wealth of useful information that could transform users into better voters and citizens, many people largely use the Internet for entertainment purposes. With this deluge of information comes issues of privacy that are difficult for governments to address—what role should government play in regulating sites like Facebook and Google? What are the most appropriate privacy policies? Overall, the democratization of information complicates and likely worsens the environment for governance.

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